

# MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT

## DEFINITION

Defined as the theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle, this offense category includes the stealing of automobiles, trucks, buses, motorcycles, motorscooters, snowmobiles, etc. The definition excludes the taking of a motor vehicle for temporary use by those persons having lawful access.

## TREND

| <i>Year</i>    | <i>Number of offenses</i> | <i>Rate per 100,000<br/>inhabitants</i> |
|----------------|---------------------------|---|
| 1998           | 1,242,781                 | 459.8                                   |
| 1999           | 1,147,305                 | 420.7                                   |
| Percent change | -7.7                      | -8.5                                    |

The estimated 1.1 million thefts of motor vehicles that occurred in the United States during 1999 represented the lowest total since 1985. By region, the distribution of thefts showed the most populous region, the South, with 37 percent of the volume, the West with 27 percent, the Midwest with 21 percent, and the Northeast with 15 percent. (See Table 3.)

The 1999 figures show that the greatest number of motor vehicle thefts was recorded during the month of August, and the fewest thefts occurred in February. (See Table 2.29.)

Table 2.29

**Motor Vehicle Theft by Month**  
Percent distribution, 1995-1999

| Month     | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|
| January   | 8.6  | 8.8  | 9.0  | 9.1  | 8.5  |
| February  | 7.5  | 8.0  | 7.6  | 7.9  | 7.3  |
| March     | 8.2  | 8.2  | 8.2  | 8.5  | 8.0  |
| April     | 7.8  | 7.9  | 7.9  | 7.9  | 7.7  |
| May       | 8.2  | 8.1  | 8.2  | 8.3  | 8.0  |
| June      | 8.1  | 8.0  | 8.1  | 8.1  | 8.2  |
| July      | 8.6  | 8.8  | 8.7  | 8.7  | 8.8  |
| August    | 9.0  | 8.6  | 8.7  | 8.8  | 9.1  |
| September | 8.4  | 8.2  | 8.3  | 8.3  | 8.5  |
| October   | 8.9  | 8.6  | 8.6  | 8.4  | 8.7  |
| November  | 8.5  | 8.3  | 8.2  | 7.9  | 8.5  |
| December  | 8.3  | 8.6  | 8.3  | 8.1  | 8.7  |

A comparison of 1999 figures to the previous year's figures shows that motor vehicle thefts declined 8 percent nationally and 7 percent in cities collectively. Among city population groupings, those with populations of 250,000 to 499,999 and cities with populations of 25,000 to 49,999 experienced the greatest decline in motor vehicle theft, 9 percent. Decreases of 12 percent in suburban counties and 7 percent in rural counties were recorded during the same 2-year period.

Declines in the numbers of motor vehicle thefts from 1998 to 1999 were reported for all four regions. The greatest decline, a 12-percent drop, was reported in the Western States. The Northeastern States reported an 8-percent decrease; the Southern States, a 6-percent decline; and the Midwestern States, a 5-percent drop. (See Table 4.)

The volume of motor vehicle thefts in 1999 declined 22 percent from the 1995 volume and fell 30 percent from the 1990 figure.

## Rate

The national rate of 421 motor vehicle thefts per 100,000 inhabitants recorded for the year was 8 percent lower than in 1998. This figure is 25 percent below the 1995 rate, and 36 percent lower than the 1990 rate.

For every 100,000 inhabitants living in metropolitan areas, 486 motor vehicle thefts were reported in 1999. For the same period, motor vehicle theft rates of 224 per 100,000 population in cities outside metropolitan areas and 123 motor vehicle thefts per 100,000 inhabitants in rural counties were recorded. The highest rate of motor vehicle theft during the year—1,012 for every 100,000 inhabitants—was experienced in cities with populations 500,000 to 999,999. Cities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants recorded a rate of 223 per 100,000.

Regionally, the highest motor vehicle theft rate was recorded in the Western States at 506 per 100,000 people. The Southern States reported a rate of 439; the Midwestern States, a rate of 375; and the Northeastern States, a rate of 343 per 100,000 inhabitants. Compared to 1998 figures, all regions registered declines in 1999. The greatest drop, 13 percent, was recorded in the West. The Northeast reported a decrease of 8 percent, the South a decline of 7 percent, and the Midwest a drop of 6 percent. (See Table 4.)

## Nature

Nationally, the value of motor vehicles stolen during 1999 was estimated at over \$7 billion. The average value per vehicle was \$6,104 at the time of theft. The recovery percentage for the value of vehicles stolen was higher than for any other property type. Relating the value of vehicles stolen to the value of those recovered resulted in a 67-percent recovery rate for 1999. (See Tables 23 and 24.)

Seventy-five percent of all motor vehicles reported stolen during the year were automobiles, 19 percent were trucks or buses, and the remainder were other types of vehicles.

Table 2.30

**Motor Vehicle Theft**

Percent distribution by region, 1999

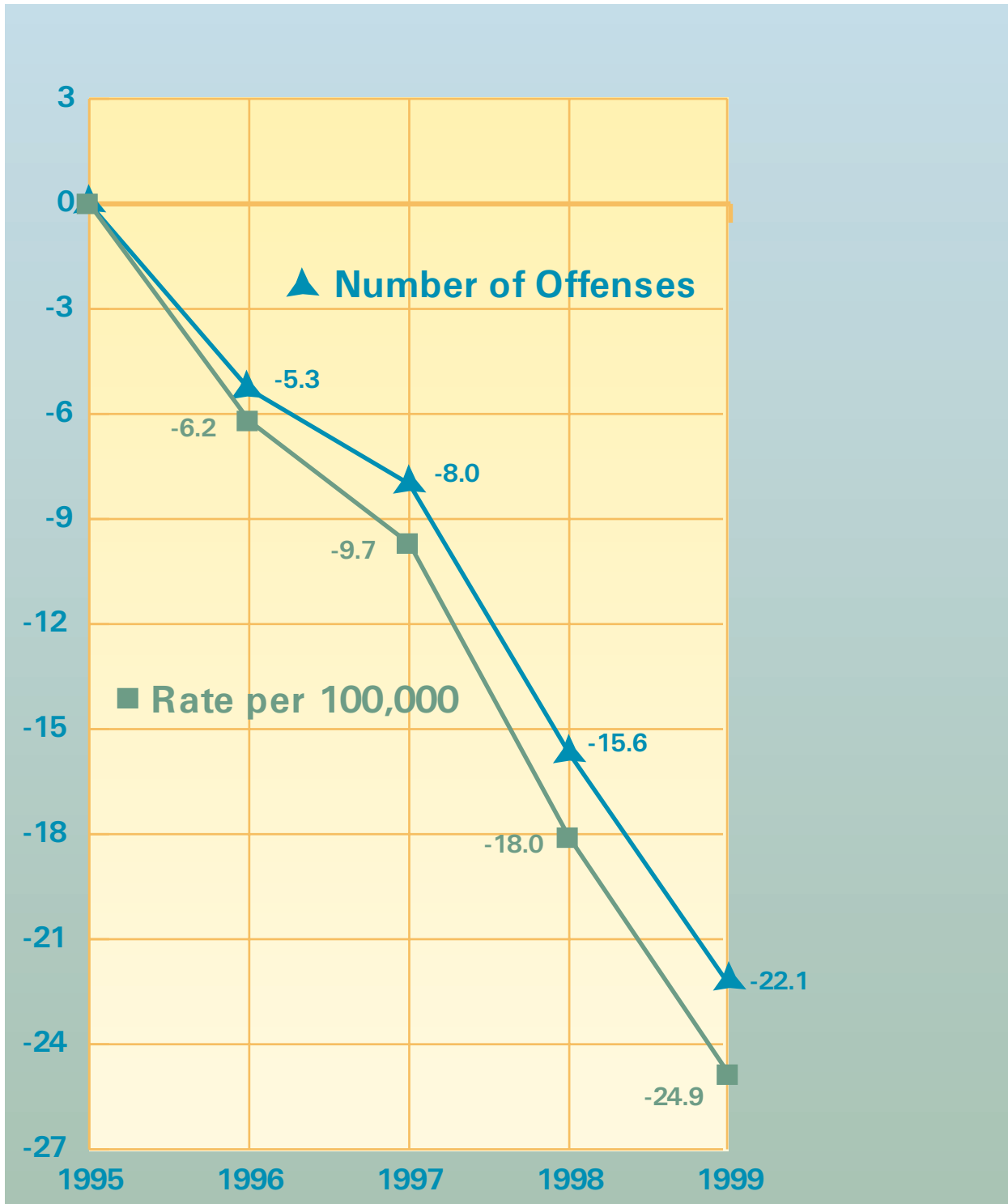
| Region              | Total <sup>1</sup> | Autos | Trucks and buses | Other vehicles |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------|------------------|----------------|
| Total               | 100.0              | 74.6  | 18.7             | 6.6            |
| Northeastern States | 100.0              | 87.0  | 8.0              | 5.1            |
| Midwestern States   | 100.0              | 79.4  | 13.5             | 7.2            |
| Southern States     | 100.0              | 71.9  | 20.5             | 7.6            |
| Western States      | 100.0              | 70.6  | 23.6             | 5.8            |

<sup>1</sup> Because of rounding, the percentages may not add to total.

## Figure 2.18

### Motor Vehicle Theft

Percent Change from 1995



## Law Enforcement Response

Law enforcement agencies across the Nation reported a 15-percent motor vehicle theft clearance rate in 1999. Motor vehicle theft clearance rates in the Nation's cities ranged from a 31-percent clearance rate in cities with less than 10,000 inhabitants to 9 percent in cities with populations of 1 million and over. Law enforcement agencies in rural counties reported a 30-percent clearance rate, and those in suburban counties reported an 18-percent clearance rate. (See Table 25.)

Regional clearance percentages for motor vehicle theft were 17 percent each for the Southern and Midwestern States, and 13 percent and 12 percent in the Northeastern and the Western States, respectively.

Persons in the under-18 age group were involved in 19 percent of the motor vehicle thefts cleared nationally. This group also comprised 20 percent of the motor vehicle thefts cleared in rural counties, 19 percent of those cleared in cities, and 18 percent of those cleared in suburban counties.

Of the estimated 142,200 arrests for motor vehicle theft in 1999, males accounted for 84 percent of those arrested. By race, 55 percent of the arrestees were white, 42 percent were black, and the remainder were of other races.

By age, the largest percentage of persons arrested for motor vehicle theft—67 percent—was persons under the age of 25. Though arrestees under the age of 18 accounted for 35 percent of the total in 1999, arrests of persons under age 18 were down 5 percent from 1998 levels. Arrests of juvenile females and males decreased 10 percent and 4 percent, respectively.

Sixty-five percent of all motor vehicle theft arrestees were adults. However, the number of adults arrested in 1999 declined 6 percent from the 1998 figure.

Total motor vehicle theft arrests in 1999 were down 6 percent from the previous year's total. Long-term trends indicate the 1999 arrest total was 24 percent below the 1995 level and 38 percent lower than the 1990 figure.